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Fourteen Stations to Southern Cross

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Poems by Glen Phillips

Fourteen Stations to Southern Cross

Stations: 1

Southern Cross

A coiling double steel spring
over two hundred miles of scrublands,
farmlands, salt marsh and granite domes,
with the soil ever-reddening
like poisoned flesh round a festered wound.

It was a cool grey morning
at the 'Cross that Easter day
when the black rocket of a loco
came roaring up the line from Perth
to grind steel against steel
as it braked at the station platform
and slid the last screeching yards
with wheels locked and spark
showers shooting out.

This was the Varischetti Special,
pausing before its last rescue dash,
bearing divers ready to go below,
to try to pluck the entombed miner
from his watery air-locked shaft;
taking final refill for its boiler from
O'Connor's timely water scheme pipe.

Nearly twenty years of trains would pass
that station night and day until
my summer birth in white heat.
Strange station prelude for my own
journeying, this singular mission out of night.

Stations: 2

Northam: The Shamrock Bar Before Apex Night, 1949

This was before the bands, when lady drinkers
took to the bar parlour solicitously sucking
gin and lemon, or a port, in mittened hands.
In the proper bar, the saloon, middies
stood in rows before serious drinkers, dusty
in work clothes beneath glittering, ranked
bottles of exotic scotches or vermouths;
way before there were flickering blue TV screens,
with callers droning results from Caulfield or Belmont Park.

We'd have a few drinks to begin with
until the President and the rest came in;
then it would be time for the dinner meet.

The pub set up the room for us each week
same as the Rotary mob had used
on other nights. We had our roast
and three veg (not forgetting soup for a start)
including a modest bread roll with the repast.
Before the dessert (fruit salad and a scoop)
the fines-master would be on his feet.
Those days you didn't drink wine - just
beer or a shandy for the Loyal Toast.
That particular meeting night we won't forget
because the President resigned and left.

Something at church he said. The boys drove
him to the station with his bags for the night train
to Perth. There was much shaking of hands
and heads. The train steamed out
with talk of legal challenges, courts.
Serious stuff we understood from his pale
face at the window. He's never yet come back.

Stations: 3
Mukinbudin

The rails run on through Mukinbudin
making for Bencubbin
on the northern line.

Meanwhile from pristine white
of wheatbins, A-class, monolithic,
flocks of pink-and-greys rise
and cluster again among spilt grain.

On, past modest picketed platform
of WAGR standard station building,
this railway leads out of the last
of the northern wheatbelt, out to where
grey salt-bush and grey-green mulga
and spinifex dominate
amid ringed salt-lakes of red-dirt plains.

Even now, for most white men,
this way leads to deserts and death.
It's the cross we bear for plunder
of these lands that once felt
only weight of respect of a dark
and lightly placed bare foot.

Stations: 4
Lake Grace

I looked at her ankles coming out
of her old sandshoes as we sat
on the back verandah of the schoolhouse
that stands no more by the lake.

Daisie Mundi ate from her enamel plate,
like a child's bowl, that we kept for her.
and our oldest knife and fork,
the brass showing on the worn prongs,
the handle of the knife yellowed with use.

As the propped clothes-line flapped
with her wash I looked and looked again
at her ankle's silky black. Suppose
after all she wore black stockings? For it was true
the palms of her hands, as she scraped
the last of sausage and mash, were almost white.

But it puzzled me. Just as the black
beast of a train that had thundered from night
into the prim little *eau-di-Nil* station
(with its *marseille* orange-tiled roof,
all *art nouveau* fashionably bespoke)
had thrown me into confusion with its fuss.

There, as the blackness blazed into roaring light
I was overcome. So I turned my face to the wall
while my dad searched lighted compartments
for sign of mother's best friend, come to help.
In the morning Daisie Mundi was gone.
I missed taking her dinner plate out.

Stations: 5
Mornington Mills

When the rats ran through our mill house
which was also the school house, running
and running along joists behind the room's
hessian lining, you could see bulge of bodies
passing. It was a rough town
this mill town. Rougher than we knew.

The big boys broke thorns from bouganvilleas
and pressed them into us to hear our squeals.
Like the rats fighting and mating at night.
While down at the mill-owned tavern

men with only a thumb left on a hand
broke beer bottles over their screaming wives.

Who were we to comprehend
if an engine driver mourned,
though twenty years had gone,
those nine men dead under a mound
of torn sleepers, rucked-up rails,
and trucks piled high? 'The Jubilee'
was hitting ninety miles an hour,
they'd said, as it crossed the trestle bridge.
The brakes were gone and the cutting
coming up. Some jumped clear
but when they found old Maggs
he was just a mess of mince
fit for a butcher's tray. Except his leg -
pinned under two stacked trucks. The Doc
cut it off to get the corpse out.
Later, when they found the leg,
it was buried by the railway line -
memento to the milling company.
After all, everything else was theirs!

When the picture-show man came with his van
and backed up to the recreation hall door,
we could watch the looming black
and white images of Hollywood's zombies
shambling through Limberlost glades,
while comic wide-eyed black men ran
and blubbered more than we did, afterwards,
waking in nightmare rictus in our beds.

In light of day we bravely waved to the driver
tugging a rake of green fresh-cut jarrah,
bleeding in twenty-foot lengths, through
the mill-owned siding which served, by grace,
as mill-town station for the mill-owned populace.

Stations: 6 **Perth**

Troop trains drew out of arched precincts
where the mighty clock ruled over parallel
platforms, where men with lamps and whistles
waved flags and kept everything on time.

Mother shepherded our little flock
fortified with penny ice-creams
as bands played stirring wartime tunes,
while girl friends and younger brothers

enviously ran beside moving compartments
where khaki-clad soldier boys whistled and grinned
and stowed their kit bags and rifles clumsily
as their last train drew slowly out.

With surprise we saw real tears run
down our mum's face into her ice-cream cone.
Outside the station, horse-drawn wagons waited
and the street photographer in thin and shabby suit
flashed and handed us his ticket. Later
when we viewed the family snap it was sad
the only one missing the action was our dad.

Stations: 7
Beverley

We always parked the car
near the station, Saturdays.
This was the day the shops
stayed open 'til late. A market
day, perhaps, in the English fashion
that the settlers had brought
like our rural habits
when they named this Avon Valley
and herded Aborigines away.

Though it's true some came back.
We used to see them from the car
in a circle squatting on the one
patch of green grass that faced the town.
It was slap bang beside the train line,
near the railway station in fact.
So we were told we must use
the station lavatories, not
the better ones erected in the park.

Once, I recall, bored almost
to stupefaction, while elders
dallied in pubs or tearooms
my cousin and I got talking
seated up high in the back
of their 1938 Chev car.
We talked on and on of favourite books,
each in our final year of primary school;
She of plans for high school. I of beyond.
It was the first time I'd felt free
of the combat zone of boys versus girls
which the past seven years of school
had always been. Neither noticed
the shadows nor the car grow dark inside.

Until, warned by siblings, maybe
parents sternly glanced through the glass -
yet relieved, it seemed, and ordered us
out, with boxed ears. I puzzled
that peace after a seven years war
should be greeted thus. And stumbled
toward the station, crossed lines
towards the platform to answer
that other call of nature
so inadequately named, perhaps.

Stations: 8
Bridgetown

It was bitter cold these winters
when the boy was sent at four a.m.
to rouse the fireman from his iron-roofed home.
The driver had at least a half-hour more
while the fireman set and fired
and built up full pressure of steam.

Later, passengers turned up, still
pre-dawn, to stamp in overcoats
and blow into fists. Bells ringing,
telegraph battering in the station rooms,
as luggage was stacked on trolleys
under weak yellow of lighted lamps.

The fog confirmed its presence
making shafts and cones and halos
of the station's yard lights,
as the locomotive inched out
of its shed with a shuddering thrust
of slipping wheels. And joined up.

Down the carriages the thudding of doors,
now passengers hang out windows in farewell,
the engine driver yanks the cord
and wakes the town with warning whistle blast.
The stationmaster hands over a brass staff,
the guard looks at his fob watch. They depart.

Drawing its brown caterpillar out of dock
the 'E Class' gathers way, whistles again
at the street crossings and passes
between the long apple-drying sheds,
hiving steam pressure for the haul up Hester Bank.
At the start you can never know the way ahead.

Stations: 9
Pingelly

Pingelly just after the war
was an odd sort of town.
You could hardly believe
they once had a flour-mill
by the station. They'd even
held the Pingelly Grand Prix
in those heady pre-war years
when all the pubs ran strong
on a Saturday football night.

Pity Morambine lost out.
It was marked out to be
a new Avon Valley town.
Then the railway bypassed
by five miles to the west
and Pingelly's chance had come.

I was old enough for doubts
about a Christian life.
The rector had sweaty hands
and his unwashed cassock
announced his unwanted nearness
to his young cringing flock. So I
skipped Sunday school often,
agreed with rougher schoolmates
to renounce God. Trouble was
in a small town it gets harder
to dodge. Parents backed up the church.

Our mother just then in hospital
because of some nameless fate
she was too grim to unfold, but
we'd heard miscarriage spoken of,
at any rate, cycling to bring
a parcel of clean-washed things,
I rode toward the railway crossing
as always, in some haste. Christ,
I had good brakes! And needed them,
for the rector's Ford, bolt upright
on its spindly wheels near got me
at the crossroads, coming up on my left.
He careered on like a locomotive
for another fifty yards before he stopped.
Then backed up furiously to where
I stood, still shaking, holding up my bike.

'You come to church, young man!'

he barked, his face all purple
with rage. But I with growing anger
just stared him out.

Later at the hospital with mother,
her hand on the Bible by her on the bed,
she spoke tearfully that we
should all be brave. Able to go on
alone if need be and it pleased
God to call her. Her mouth twisted,
'Now be good!' she said, and asked
if I was saying my prayers. 'No,'
I joked, my mind still grasping
how close the church had been
to finishing me off fifteen minutes before.
So I went home to my chores
feeding the chooks, with that evil eye
of an old rooster crowing over his brood.
And all for the occasional warm egg
and an ancient hen to sacrifice
for dinner on Easter day.

Stations: 10
Mount Kokeby

'Block it your way!' howled my aunt
as the pet kangaroo sprang
waywardly it seemed towards my face.
So I fell back weakly as the joey
made off for the open wide farm gate.
Later someone brought it back after a chase
and despite my aunt's shrill grief
the joey survived. It was I fell from grace.

Another time, I drew in at the roadside
station (where grandad had loaded wheat).
Again harvest time, as trucks from farms
queued and elevators rattled with the strain
of shifting tonnes of the river of pale grain.
Soon silos would be chock full; out of harm's
way under blue plastic tarps the overflow.
So bread would be baked and broken, stuff of psalms.

How many more times
can I come down
that long road
from Mount Kokeby
to Bally Bally Hall
to where my mother married,
where I was christened,

where the little school
once rang with shrill
children's voices?
When you drive
down a country road
you can't easily
tell yourself. 'This
time may be my last
run over the old track.'

Stations: 11
Karping

This is the watershed where
steam trains crossed from one
river's system to another -
Avon to Hotham. Just
a raised loading shelf
of local scree, laterite
edged with jarrah lumber,
with the sign Karping Siding
and a standpipe for the train.

The Hotham here is salt now,
where once deep ponds were clean
and pure enough to pump up
water for the Albany Express.
Or maybe a mixed goods
steaming on Collie coal. Karping
where we lit a fire to cook breakfast -
boys on cycling trip some fifty years ago -
but one of us dropped our pocket knife

in the dirt. Unthinking walked away.
Hours later pushing our bikes back
we met the swagman. A devil!
He was blackened as the billy
swinging from his pack but stopped
us on the road. We wondered
whether he was set to rob us
or something worse. But
yellow teeth smiled: 'Boys,' he said,
'one of you dropped a knife back there.
I've wedged it in the fork of a jam tree,
where you lit your fire. You'll see.'

Stations: 12
York

The first thing the boy looked for on the road

was the squat white tower with cone-shaped roof
and its three dark oblong windows, which showed
on the same side, above the door. Aloof
it stood in the parched paddock by the gate,
a toy rocket waiting for its launch. That
was his silo, unique, for which he'd wait
eagerly each time. Once past it, he sat
back as the road ran between salmon gums
stretching up their elegant olive shafts
among grey york gums, most with scar that comes
they said, where Nyoongars, practising their crafts,
had cut their bark shields, needed for a fight.
At last Mount Bakewell, blue-black, loomed in sight.

Stations: 13
Moorine Rock

I do remember our train
stopping sometimes in the night.
Glimpses of harsh-lit but empty
platform and some rail worker
slumping past. When the engine
re-docked with its vertebrae,
which was our train, it spasmed
strange couplings in dreaming sleep
for the passengers stretched out
in stockinged feet.

Morning brought us to another stop.
While officials fussed, we took
time out at this little town
called Moorine Rock. In the back
of their pub the door was open
to the bar. We crowded in
and I got talking to a scrawny coot.
Seems he was a fossicker,
a local, who worked where he could,
'specking' after rain, dollying
a pot from this show or that.
In between, he picked up work
on farms. Seems he knew a lot
about Goldfields history and such.

Told us a story about the big rock:
years ago a hermit squatted there.
He dammed up the winter run-off
and started a summer garden.
Stocked it with vegies and melons,
a fruit tree or two, even date palms
donated by passing Afghan camel men.

The man had come outback for gold,
but found no gold, worked hard on farms
and mines and kept to his plan. At last the ship
was due so he packed up and took
the train to the coast. But at the port
he met his girl in another man's arms.

The trauma turned his mind, it seemed.
Jumped the 'rattler' and headed back
to the Fields. Shadow now of the man he'd been.
Hair and beard gone white,
he went bush. Disappeared.
The next thing they knew he'd found
this bit of ground, a soak, near the Rock.
Applied to rent it from the State
so he could grow his own garden, sell produce
in exchange for what he couldn't make -
matches, tea, candles and the like.
Over many years he worked there, even
grew a patch of wheat, milled flour
between rough-carved stones. At last
the Yilgarn Mining Warden told police
to keep an eye out for the old bugger,
drop off some rations now and again.

But some jumped-up government clerk in Perth
reckoned he'd got behind with his rent
and wanted to turf him off the place.
Poor devil, he appealed, and the Warden
saved him. Told the clerk to get off
the hermit's back. They say
he lived on until too old and frail
to survive the hell of summers
when heatwaves nearly melt the Rock,
or winters when the ice at dawn
shows a thick crust on any gnamma hole.
He died in some old man's home
by the coast, far from his rock-hole
humpy in the mulga outback. They say
you can still see the date palms
and a big stone he used as a cave door.

But just then in the story, the train whistle
blew. We men grabbed all the bottles we could hold
and out of the pub and over the road
we stormed. Piled into our dog boxes
as the train puffed out of the little station.
Soon we'd left the dust of Moorine Rock
and the hermit's story far behind.

Stations: 14
Southern Cross

Listening for trains was something we did
as children. We would put our hands
on the warm smooth rail, lower heads
to lean an ear to this longest steel bell,
listening for tremors of trains here
in red desert, a mulga and mallee land,
where lowland salt flats rise to ridges
of quartz, mullock heaps and old poppet heads
on skylines, crucifixes to folly of gold.
We still do listen in this country for the next coming,
in this place of skulls, of desert she-oaks,
of spheres and melancholy
with their tones and tunes.

Glen Phillips
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